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### A critical turn in higher education research: turning the critical lens on the Academic Language and Learning educator

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## **A critical turn in higher education research: turning the critical lens on the Academic Language and Learning educator**

### **Abstract**

This paper suggests that historical ontology, as one form of reflexive critique, is an instructive research design for making sense of the political and historical constitution of the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educator in Australian higher education. The ALL educator in this paper refers to those practitioners in the field of ALL, whose ethical agency has largely been taken for granted since their slow and uneven emergence in the latter half of the twentieth century. Using the lens of governmentality, genealogical design and archaeological method, the historical ontology proposed in this paper demonstrates how the ethical remit of the ALL educator to 'make a difference' to student learning is not necessarily a unifying construct providing a foundational moral basis for the work, but a contingent historical and political effect of the government of conduct in liberal society. The findings of this approach are not intended to undermine the agency of the ALL educator, but to assist in making sense of the historical conditions that frame and complicate their institutional intelligibility as ethical agents in the academy.

### **Keywords**

education, turn, higher, critical, educator, learning, language, academic, lens, turning, research

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# A critical turn in higher education research: turning the critical lens on the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educator

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This paper suggests that historical ontology (Foucault, 1984, 1997), as one form of reflexive critique, is an instructive research design for making sense of the political and historical constitution of the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educator in Australian higher education. The ALL educator in this paper refers to those practitioners in the field of Academic Language and Learning, whose ethical agency has largely been taken for granted since their slow and uneven emergence in the latter half of the twentieth century. Using the lens of governmentality, genealogical design and archaeological method, the historical ontology proposed in this paper demonstrates how the ethical remit of the ALL educator to ‘make a difference’ to student learning is not necessarily a unifying construct providing a foundational moral basis for the work, but a contingent historical and political effect of the government of conduct in liberal society. The findings of this approach are not intended to undermine the agency of the ALL educator, but to assist in making sense of the historical conditions that frame and complicate their institutional intelligibility as ethical agents in the academy.

**Keywords:** academic language and learning; historical ontology; agency

## Introduction

In her historical overview of research into student learning in higher education, Haggis (2009, p. 388) called for a greater critical reflexivity and a more concerted effort ‘to look for ways to better understand the value-laden nature, and effects, of our own positions’ as we engage in research and practice concerned with making sense of higher education, student learning and the problem of difference. With the lens of research and practice firmly located on shoring up certainties about difference in student performance, her suggestion is that we have overlooked other ways of thinking about higher education research and failed to develop more sophisticated critical designs for making sense of our own value positions. Taking up this challenge, this paper reports on a study that utilises a Foucauldian historical ontology (Foucault, 1997, 1984) as one critical design for making sense of the historical conditions that have framed the institutional intelligibility and ethical agency of the Academic Language

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and Learning (ALL) educator (henceforth ALL educator) in Australian higher education.

To provide a brief background on the subject of this paper, the ALL educator refers to those practitioner-researchers whose work is concerned with student language, learning, literacy and numeracy development in Australian universities, and whose professional membership is aligned to the Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL, <http://www.aall.org.au/>). Despite the formation of the Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) in 2007, and a position statement produced within the field a number of years prior (Carmichael, Hicks, McGowan, & Van der Wal, 1999), attempts to make sense of the field reveals multiplicity in every facet of its existence. For example, ALL educators arrive, often ‘by accident’ (Percy, 2011), from a variety of pathways with diverse qualifications and experience to operate in an environment where: their work is often cast in both academic and service terms; they may be deployed, just as one example, to teach ‘generic learning skills’, ‘academic literacy’ and/ or ‘English language proficiency’; and where academic literacy, for example, is recognised as a moral imperative and a marketable commodity, a remediable ‘skill’ and a developmental capacity, the responsibility of the student, the responsibility of the ALL educator, the responsibility of the discipline academic and the responsibility of the curriculum. The tensions between the various histories and rationalities that underpin these multiple understandings keep ALL educators in an ambiguous space, floating between the margins and the centre, between the student, the faculty and the institution, between a liberal notion of equity and the values of the marketplace, between fixing the problem, changing the culture, and constantly reinventing themselves.

What marks this field of practitioners is their very ‘in betweenness’—their diversity, ambiguity and vulnerability—combined with their professional will to tell the truth about themselves in ways that gain authority and stability in the academy. Theirs is a history of attempting to find their place, their space, and in their ‘will to truth’, a description of *who* they are and *why* they are here (see, for example, Chanock, 1994; Chanock, Burley & Davies, 1996; Garner, Chanock & Clerehan, 1995; Samuelowicz, 1990). However, as a rather disparate field of practitioners bound together through similar institutional deployment, practical experience and a general commitment to ‘make a difference’ to student learning, the challenge to articulate an inclusive and comprehensive definition of the knowledge and expertise of this field in the present is an ongoing challenge. Historical ontology is, therefore, one attempt to elucidate the instability of identity in the field—to consider how ALL educators have come to make sense in multiple ways—and to examine how they make sense of themselves as ethical agents in the academy within relations of power and knowledge. In doing so, I examine the political rationality underpinning the production of truth that warrants their existence and constructs their service in particular ways at particular times to do particular work.

As suggested above, the Foucauldian historical ontology (Foucault, 1984, 1997) proposed in this paper is primarily concerned with making sense of the discursive and historical conditions that have framed and complicated the institutional intelligibility of the ALL educator in the academy. First, it seeks to demonstrate how the ethical remit to ‘make a difference’ to student learning, and the moral high ground this encompasses, is not a unifying construct providing a foundational moral basis for the work, but a contingent historical and political effect of the government of conduct in the academy. To elaborate, ALL educators emerged out of the convergence of political, economic, social and intellectual forces that formed the struts upon which

specialised fields of educational expertise designed to ‘make a difference’ became intelligible. The ALL field in Australia, for example, can be said to have grown up in the 1970s out of counselling and remedial English services to establish itself as a field of practices concerned with equity and social justice through the development of students’ academic literacy, language and learning. However, despite the moral integrity embedded in the idea of ‘making a difference’, a more apt analysis is that they are compelled to work with difference; indeed, they emerged as the by-product of the academy’s anxiety over managing difference (Percy, 2011). In this study, therefore, I am less concerned with explaining how they make a difference than interrogating what difference they are invited to make.

Second, and by way of the question above, this historical ontology seeks to demonstrate how, as notions of difference and the management of difference vary over time, the type of value positions these have made available for the ALL educator have also shifted; thus, the value positions that circulate through the profession in the present are themselves characterised by difference and dispersion. For this reason, I examine how the idea of making a difference has changed over time, according to which historical regimes of truth, and what this means for the ALL educator in the present.

The purpose of using historical ontology to make sense of the historical constitution of the ALL educator is to transcend the ‘cautious and self-referential’ (Clegg, 2009, p. 413) accounts that seek to justify their existence by appropriating and recirculating the discourses of governance. It proceeds by first describing how historical ontology can be understood as an instructive critical research design for making sense of the various historical and often conflicting value positions of the ALL educator in Australian higher education. It then provides a brief overview of the analytical outcomes of one such research design to demonstrate how historical variations in the representation of difference and their attendant interventions have created a professional complex of agency which is played out in the daily lives of ALL educators in the present.

## **Historical ontology as a research design**

Historical ontology as a research design provides the means to examine how we have constituted ourselves as ‘moral agents in quite specific, local, historical ways’ (Hacking, 2002, p. 3). This critical work takes a philosophical lens to the analysis of historical data to identify those events ‘that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 46). This approach turns away from questions that seek to establish a foundational professional subject, such as ‘Where do we come from?’ and ‘Why we are here?’ Instead, historical ontology asks ‘How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge?’ ‘How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations?’ and ‘How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 49). In my study, these questions were used to examine the ALL educator as an effect of the dynamic interaction between power, knowledge and ethics in the academy. These are represented in the three circles in Figure 1.

To conduct this historical ontology, the conceptual and analytical tools of governmentality, genealogy and archaeology were combined in a three dimensional analysis of the historical constitution of the ethical agency of the ALL educator. The conceptual lens of governmentality is useful for examining how ALL educators are

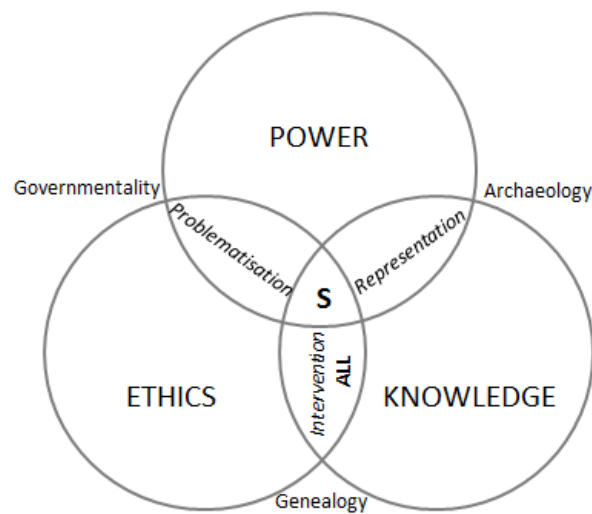
implicated in those ‘techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour’ in liberal society (Rose, 1999, p. 20). This lens recognises power as a political and relational activity operating in a capillary way on and through the social body: where political activity refers to all the structural, social and self-regulatory mechanisms for governing the conduct of oneself and others, and where all political activity or practices are underpinned by a form of political reason or rationality about ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Burchell, 1996). Through this lens, I was able to examine how at specific historical moments, the constellation of historical circumstance (eg. post-war reconstruction), political reasoning (eg. soft social liberalism) and social and economic exigencies (eg. the science and technology crisis of the 1950s and 60s) combined to: reconfigure the university as an apparatus of government in a liberal society; and problematise the subject of higher education (the student) as an object of government in particular ways for particular ends.

Methodologically, archaeology (Foucault, 1972) was used to locate these problematisations in their singularity and locate the fields of knowledge that were competing to make sense of the problem in order to: (re)present the student as the object of government; and specify the domain of activity that would count as an appropriate intervention. It is in this latter objective that the possibility of who and what the ALL educator can reasonably be, do and say as an appropriate intervention and ethical agent in the academy is discursively and politically limited within the power-knowledge nexus. In general, archaeology involves the isolation of a discursive formation and an examination of its archive (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). The archive refers to ‘not just any discourses, but the set that conditions what counts as knowledge in a particular period’ (Flynn, 1994, p. 29). In this study, the archive consisted of higher education reports, policy documents, and research papers at the international, national and institutional level, and the full published archive of ALL. Particular points of interest in the analysis of the archive included the struggles and transformations in historical and political definitions of what constitutes a university education and the problem of student learning.

Returning to the original aim of this paper to elucidate the instability of identity within the field of ALL, the overall research design drew on two key genealogical techniques - ‘historical nominalism’ and ‘fragmentation of the present’ (Flynn, 1994) - to demonstrate: how the institutional intelligibility of the ALL educator is intrinsically tied to the political and discursive constitution of the higher education students’ subjectivity; and how historical ruptures in these discursive constitutions have created for the ALL educator in the present a discursive complexity, and a kind of ‘ontological stammering’ (Lather, 2003). Historical nominalism refers to the technique of decentring the ALL educator as the object of inquiry to focus on its conditions of emergence. This means that the ALL educator is examined as a governmental intervention whose institutional intelligibility is viewed as an effect of the problematisation of higher education as an apparatus of government and the representation of the higher education student as the object of government. It is argued that it is the historical and political constitution of the student as the subject of higher education and the object of government that has a direct bearing on who and what the ALL educator can ‘be’ in any particular historical moment. The subject located at the centre of the analysis, therefore, is not the ALL educator, but the higher education student, given as the (S) in Figure 1.

## Figure 1 goes here

Figure 1: Conceptual and analytical framework for an historical ontology of ALL



The fragmentation of the present was achieved by isolating and tracing four historical breaks or displacements in the discursive constitution of the higher education student and, relationally, what has come to count as an appropriate ALL intervention (Lemke, 2007). These four displacements were selected for their capacity to juxtapose significantly different versions of what has historically counted as an ALL intervention. This was achieved by taking this framework and repeating it at four historical moments of emergence.

In summary, this study employs: the lens of governmentality to examine the constitution of the ALL educator as both agent and effect of power in the academy; a genealogical design that decentres the ALL educator as the object of analysis, and fragments the present by tracing the surface of emergence of four discursive ‘displacements’ in the identity of the ALL educator; and archaeological erudition to elaborate their conditions of emergence. This is achieved by drawing on the power-knowledge-ethics axes of analysis of the historical archive according to:

Power	The constellation of political, social and economic circumstance that resulted in a specific <b>problematisation</b> of higher education (for example, student failure, social inclusion, employability, international standards) and created the space for specific representations of the student as the object of government to appear;
Knowledge	The ‘intellectual technologies’ (Edwards, 2004) used to make sense of the problem and produce specific <b>representations</b> of the higher education student as the object of government; and
Ethics	The power-knowledge nexus, institutional exigencies and available symbolic and material resources that legitimate specific forms of ethical <b>intervention</b> , and invite ALL educators to recognise themselves as ethical subjects in particular ways for particular ends.

## The analytical outcomes

Using the conceptual and analytical framework outlined above, four historically different versions of the ALL educator as an ethical agent in the academy were identified and isolated in this particular study. These are the emergence of: the *therapeutic intervention for the ‘academic casualty’* in the 1950–60s; the *educational intervention for the ‘social casualty’* in the 1970s–80s; the *curriculum intervention for the ‘lifelong learner’* in the 1990s; and the *pedagogical/administrative intervention for the ‘Graduate’* in the 2000s, as shown in Table 1.

These four versions were then juxtaposed in order to demonstrate that none could necessarily be described as a ‘development’ in the professional field of ALL—from individual to pedagogical and policy-related practices, for example—rather they were shown to constitute deep ruptures or displacements in the ethical agency of the ALL educator. This was achieved by demonstrating how each one in their (admittedly unnaturally assigned) singularity had been produced by historically contingent social and economic conditions, a prevailing political rationality, a dominant diagnosis of the ‘problem’ of higher education, specific intellectual technologies that sought to make sense of the problem, and policy-related exigencies that rendered privileged versions of ethical agency intelligible.

Table 1: Analytical outcomes of an historical ontology of ALL

AGENT OF REDEMPTION <i>ALL IN A WELFARE SOCIETY</i>		AGENT OF CHANGE <i>ALL IN A LEARNING SOCIETY</i>	
1950s–60s A therapeutic intervention for the ‘academic casualty’	1970s–80s An educational intervention for the ‘social casualty’	1990s A curriculum intervention for the ‘lifelong learner’	2000s An administrative and pedagogical intervention for the ‘graduate’
The university as ‘development panacea’ (soft social liberalism and post-war reconstruction)	The university as ‘social leveller’ (hard social liberalism and socio-economic crisis)	The university as ‘economic stabiliser’ (market liberalism and competition)	The university as ‘full-service enterprise’ (neoliberalism and the global education market)
Problematising academic wastage (student failure)	Problematising social wastage (participation)	Problematising the curriculum (HE reform/ skills)	Problematising International competitiveness (reputation & ranking)
Representing the academic casualty	Representing the social casualty	Representing the lifelong learner	Representing the graduate
Psycho-social diagnosis of individual difference	Socio-cultural diagnosis of educational disadvantage	Market diagnosis of employable graduate	Ethical prognosis of the enterprising individual
Counselling the academic casualty Pastoral care Counselling Study skills	Compensating the social casualty Person-centred teaching Literacy and learning skills	Mobilising the lifelong learner Curriculum integration Generic skills—graduate qualities	Quality assuring the Graduate Curriculum mapping Credit-bearing courses
Disciplining difference, regulating normality		Disciplining freedom, regulating autonomy	



Importantly, Table 1 illustrates how the *therapeutic* and *educational* interventions correspond at a macro-level to the prevailing political rationality of a welfare society (social liberalism) where the discipline of difference in individual and social groups prevailed as the most ethical form of agency. Conversely, the *curriculum* and *administrative/pedagogical* intervention of more recent years correspond to the shift to the learning society (market and neoliberalism) where ethical agency is more attentive to regulating the freedom of the population than in the discipline of difference *per se* (see Rose, 1999). Each version of the ethical agent was also shown to mediate a different discursive space in the academy.

The *therapeutic intervention for the 'academic casualty'*, which emerged in the 1950s, was shown to be an agent of redemption concerned with disciplining difference in the individual. This version of the ALL educator as ethical agent in the academy emerged out of the confluence of the many facets and anxieties involved in the welfare state and post-war reconstruction (Georgiadis, 2007; McMahon, Thomson & Williams, 2000), which led to the problematisation of failure rates and 'academic wastage' (Baxter, 1970; Schonell, Roe & Meddleton, 1962) in higher education as a significant governmental concern (Murray et al., 1957). The problem of student failure in this period was diagnosed using the theories and concepts derived from differential psychology (Anastasi & Foley, 1949; Tyler, 1947) and functional sociology (Davis & Moore, 1949; Parsons, 1951). This diagnosis suggested that student failure could be largely understood as a psycho-social problem of individual difference emanating from the students' innate abilities, strength of personality and family background (Lazarus, 1961). This eventually led to the establishment of counselling services and workshops in study habits for individual students at risk (Anderson & Eaton, 1982). For the ALL educator/counsellor in these times, the discursive space they occupied in the academy could be summed up in terms of 'a safe space and a familiar face' (Percy, 2011). In this context, the ALL educator was seen to ameliorate the alienating effects of the physical and psychological distance between staff and students by attending to students' mental welfare and study habits at an individual level. This led to particular practices, such as the individual consultation, and professional narratives, such as the ALL educator as student advocate, that continue to have salience today.

By the 1970s, amid a constellation of the rise and fall of the welfare state combined with various financial and social crises, the political problem of 'academic wastage' was displaced by the problem of 'social wastage' (Hunter, 1994), which saw the rise of the ALL educator as *an educational intervention for the 'social casualty'*. This constellation saw the university reconfigured as a 'social leveller'—a site for the amelioration of social disadvantage (Butterfield, 1970; Gass, 1970; Lennep, 1970). What became problematised within this context was the participation and representation of minority groups in higher education. The knowledge systems brought to bear on this problem included various economic, sociological and cultural diagnoses that produced for these students a social subjectivity with cultural determinants (see, for example, Anderson, Boven, Fensham, & Powell, 1980; Hore & West, 1980; Knittel & Hill, 1973; Power, Roberston, & Beswick, 1986). In particular, this socio-cultural diagnosis of disadvantage justified the emergence of systems of expertise that functioned as compensatory 'educational' interventions that sought to ameliorate the educational disadvantage (largely interpreted as a linguistic and cultural deficit) of the target social group (Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965; Butterfield, 1970; Halsey, Floud, & Anderson, 1961; Poole, 1976). The 'non-traditional' (ERIC, 2010) and later the 'equity' student (DEET, 1990) were produced as the object of government and the target of intervention.

It was here that the therapeutic practices that appeared in the 1950s began to develop an academic face as the focus of learning support shifted from aspects of psychological adaptation to the problem of writing (literacy) (Taylor et al., 1988) and learning skills (Frederick et al., 1981). The practices that emerged out of these conditions sought to ameliorate the alienating distance between the students' own cultural background and the cultural practices of the disciplines. Slowly and unevenly, ALL as we might recognise it today created a niche outside person-centred counselling to take on the guise of person and group-centred teaching. I argue that this educational dimension of ALL work has remained stable since its emergence in the university system, but it sits in tension with the psycho-social diagnosis of student difference and the therapeutic aspects of their work.

These two brief and delineated examples intend to show how two distinct dimensions of ALL work (the therapeutic and the educational) can be traced to historical and political moments in reasoning about the subject of higher education, and in particular the imperatives for managing difference in the academy. They seek to demonstrate how these therapeutic and educational dimensions historically framed the ALL practitioner as an 'agent of redemption' whose institutional intelligibility is uniquely tied to the way difference is imagined, measured and defined. By the 1990s, however, the 'agent of redemption' became overlaid with another form of ethical agency, the 'agent of change'.

As the language and logic of the welfare state lost its legitimacy, neo-liberal political reasoning and the notion of a learning society gained greater currency at a global level, and this had significant implications for educational reform worldwide. In Australia, for example, the Dawkins reforms unified a two-tiered system of post-secondary education in the name of expansion and efficiency, and began the process of urging universities to find alternative sources of funding for their operations (Dawkins, 1988). The university was reconfigured as an 'economic stabiliser', or perhaps more tellingly, a latent source of economic growth (Dawkins, 1987; OECD, 1987), and the student was reconstituted as a 'lifelong learner' (Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994; NBEET, 1996). In this context, not only did the lack of alignment between a university education and the demands of the workplace become a source of political contention (NBEET, 1990), but so too did the lack of alignment between the operations of the university and the values of the marketplace (OECD, 1987). Among the variously stated imperatives for educational reform in this era, graduate employability rated highly, and the curriculum rather than the student became the direct object of governmental intervention. The various systems of knowledge and expertise brought to bear on the problem of employability and educational reform foregrounded the teaching of generic skills (HEC, 1992; NBEET, 1992), engagement in participatory change practices and the production of self-directed resource-based (preferably online) and the substitution of person-centred teaching with the design of 'student-centred' learning. Here, the ALL educator as a *curriculum intervention for the 'lifelong learner'* was called into being as an 'agent of change' working to facilitate curriculum reform specifically in terms of the integration of generic skills (Bowden et al., 2000; Candy, 2000). This practice mediates the discursive space between the curriculum and the lifelong learner, and seeks to ameliorate a perceived deficit between the students' education and their employability.

More recently, the ALL educator as *pedagogical and administrative intervention for the 'Graduate'*, which emerged as an intelligible identity for the ALL educator in the 2000s, was also shown to be an agent of change, disciplining freedom and regulating autonomy in the population (Rose, 1999). This particular version of the

ALL educator emerged out the university's need to operate effectively as a free-service enterprise in a global education market governed by comparative education, educational economics, organisational theory and the performative demands of international quality controls emanating from the OECD (Marginson, 2004; Marginson & Considine, 2000; OECD, 2010). Here we find a university struggling not so much with student failure as with organisational risk, ranking and reputation (Nelson, 2005). Whereas the agent of redemption was regarded as general insurance against academic failure, the agent of change is regarded as general insurance against organisational failure. In this context, the student is referred to as the 'Graduate', the quality-assured product and deliverable of the Australian university (OECD, 2008). Here the ALL educator ameliorates the distance between the university as a full-service enterprise and its international reputation by attending to its quality and performative regimes (Ball, 2000, 2003; Gill, 2004). Of interest here is that the student becomes the indirect object of practice as the focus of the ALL gaze shifts to shoring up the 'quality' of curriculum and the learning environment, through practices such as curriculum mapping, in response to quality audits from bodies such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), and notions of standards, such as the Australian Qualification Standards (AQF).

On one level, we can suggest that this shift in focus from managing difference in the individual and social group in a welfare state to the regulation of lifelong learner or Graduate through curriculum affordances in a learning society is symptomatic of a broader shift in the govern-mentality of a liberal political economy. This shift, which has occurred slowly from the 1970s, can to some degree be equated with a shift in the practices of government from a discipline to a control society, as governing becomes less concerned with disciplining the 'individual at risk' through the language and tactics of redemption and more with regulating 'populations at risk' through the language and tactics of freedom (Deleuze, 1990; Rose, 1990; Watson, 2010). Rose (1999) provides considerable insight to this shift in the logic of government (see also Miller & Rose, 2008). He locates the emergence of 'lifelong learning' out of the crisis of the 1970s when, he suggests, cultivating citizens adaptable to 'change' became a governing logic, 'unemployment' a governed phenomenon, and an active shift from 'disciplinary pedagogy to perpetual training' as one of the solutions (Rose, 1999, pp. 160–161). According to Rose, this shift saw disciplinary technologies (surveillance and normalisation) overlaid with technologies of control (freedom, choice, responsibility, evaluation and audit). It is important to note that technologies of control do not take the form of oppressive strategies of power; rather, they are technologies of freedom, enabling strategies for the 'empowerment' (read autonomy and responsibilisation) of the population. According to this logic, the active citizen is transformed into an active consumer in the marketplace of life, responsibly engaged in a 'continuous economic capitalisation of the self' (Rose, 1999, p. 161).

## Reflections

By locating and isolating these four surfaces of emergence of the institutional intelligibility of the ALL educator, I am interested in exploring how each represents both rupture and continuity in the regime of truth that frames their work in the academy—how it 'disturbs what was previously considered immobile' (Foucault, 1977, p. 147)—how it fragments and complicates the identity of the ALL educator as competing and extending discourses come to exist side by side in framing and

attenuating identity and practice. I believe this work helps to demonstrate the intensification and complexification of ALL work as additional and competing discourses about the higher education student's subjectivity open up new domains of practice that layer and compete in practical, material and philosophical ways.

It is important to note that this particular ontology is partial and unstable, but nevertheless, a clear reminder that the ethical agency of the ALL educator is an historical and layered phenomenon. It is important to note that the representation in Table 1 is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the ALL educator's historical constitution. It merely provides one temporary snapshot that allows us to take a critical stance towards the present (Dean, 1999); that is, it provides us with an analysis that allows us to look at the way our value positions are complex, historical and contingent aspects of professional being. Importantly, it provides one illustration of how the ALL educator in Australian higher education today can be understood as a post-structural subject, as St Pierre (1997, p. 410) describes:

Unstable, contingent, experimental subjects; subjects without a centred essence that remains the same throughout time; subjects produced within the conflicting discourses and cultural practices; subjects who can no longer rely on rationality to produce true knowledge; subjects at the mercy of language; subjects, who, as a result, are freer than they think.

This notion of freedom is vital. Historical ontology is a form of critique concerned with tracing the limits of thought in the field in order to identify the possibilities for transgressing them. It does not seek to establish the truth rather it involves a serious engagement with the politics of truth in the field. For Foucault, this practical critique is the most significant means for developing 'the art of not being governed quite so much' (Foucault, 1997, p. 28). For professional fields who attempt to resist the discourses that dominate their existence as technologies of reform in the academy (for example, Manathunga, 2006, 2007; McKenna, 2003; Stevenson & Kokkin, 2007; Taylor, 1990), 'coming of age' requires us to take responsibility 'not only for what we know, but also for what we have become and the various forces that have shaped us' (Ransom, 1997, p. 8), in all its multiplicity, complexity and at times, impossibility.

To conclude, if we are, as Haggis (2009, p. 389) has suggested, 'to find ways of standing outside of our histories, circumstances and fields, and of examining our epistemological and ontological assumptions', I argue that historical ontology offers higher education researchers a set of conceptual and methodological tools for making sense of the contingency of their political and ethical agency in the academy, and for identifying those limits and fractures where the possibilities for being 'otherwise' begin to appear.

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